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ABSTRACT

Noting the close relationship among reading, writing, and oral language documented by research, this paper considers studies of early writing development in the context of emergent literacy rather than in the context of work on writing processes and their development. Following a brief review of early studies of emergent literacy that includes analyses of both written products and literacy contexts, the paper examines in detail some recent studies within a conceptual framework that consists of three views of writing: writing as language, writing growth and development, and writing variation in context. From the significant amount of convergence in the findings of the studies, the paper concludes that what researchers are learning is not only an interesting picture of children's early writing development, but a valid one. (FL)

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STATE OF THE ART: CHILDREN'S EARLY WRITING DEVELOPMENT

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Studies of children's early writing development are part of a growing body of empirical research on writing processes and their development which has emerged within the last decade or two. They can be seen as part of this overall field of research on writing or as part of what has come to be called studies of emergent literacy. Since we increasingly are becoming aware of the close relationships among oral language, reading and writing, I will view the studies of early writing development considered in this presentation in the context of emergent literacy. This term generally is defined as what children know of writing and reading before the onset of formal literacy instruction in school; however, I think it is more instructive to broaden this definition to include what children come to know about writing and reading in the early elementary school years. Consequently, this presentation will focus on what we have learned about children's early writing development, both before and during the first few years of schooling.

Early studies of emergent literacy demonstrated that children know much more about literacy before they can write and read in an adult, conventional sense than we had assumed. Work by Clay (1975) and Read (1975) showed children as active developers of principles which they use to write before they entirely know the conventional system of their language. Further work by Bissex (1980) and Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982, Spanish text 1979) also showed children as active constructors of the

principles of written language, extending this finding in longitudinal studies of development toward literacy. All of this work follows the Piagetian tradition which views the child as constructing such principles "naturally," and primarily on his or her own.

In contrast to this tradition, other studies of emergent literacy, primarily ethnographic ones, showed children learning about literacy from the cultural context in which they lived. In particular, earlier work by Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Heath (1982) identified different orientations to literacy as well as patterns of literacy use by different cultural groups. These studies, and others in this tradition (Shieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984) indicate the significant role of the social and cultural context in which literacy learning takes place.

All of the above work serves as background to more recent studies of children's early writing development. In the remainder of this presentation I will discuss more recent studies within a tripartite conceptual framework. This framework consists of three views of writing: writing as an aspect of language (encompassing the relationships among oral language, writing and reading), writing growth as development (encompassing Piagetian and Vygotskian theories), and writing as a varying entity in different contexts (which explains the individual variation in development which all studies to date have found). First, then, let us turn to what we have learned about children's writing as an aspect of language.

Writing as Language

The concept of linguistic competence introduced by Chomsky in 1957 still underlies much of our thinking about language. When this concept was broadened to include variation in speakers (e.g., sex, ethnicity and social class) and in the context of language use (e.g., in the classroom, at home, with peers or strangers), the term **communicative competence** was created (Hymes 1962). This term, which broadly speaking refers to the ability to use different forms of language appropriately in various contexts, has been widely adopted in studies of literacy.

Early studies of communicative competence (primarily within the ethnography of speaking) focused almost entirely on oral language, reflecting the linguist's preference for oral language as somehow more authentic than writing. Now, however, researchers have begun to include written language in their studies of communicative competence, which, after all, seems only a recognition of reality in a highly literate society such as ours.

Much of this recent work has explored the similarities and differences between oral and written language, following up the suggestion by Goody and Watt (1968) that literacy may have both cultural and cognitive consequences. Although initially this work defined "orality" and "literacy" as separate entities, later work (Tannen 1982, Heath 1983) has shown that language use in a literate society draws on aspects of "orality" and "literacy" in subtle ways, even within a single speech or literacy event.

The research on oral and written language not only reinforces the inclusion of literacy in our model of

communicative competence, but it also provides a context within which to study development. Thus we are beginning to see the parallels between oral and written language acquisition. Also, it is becoming clear that experience in one language process may affect development in another; for example, oral language activities such as the classroom event of Sharing Time apparently help children learn the organizational structures of written language (Michaels and Collins, in press).

Both the emergent literacy research and the research on oral and written language have enabled us to see language holistically, and language use as dynamic movement between oral and literate processes. Thus children's language use can be seen as a movement, back and forth, between oral and written language structures and strategies as a way to develop communicative competence, rather than as a one-way developmental transition from oral to written language.

Recent studies of children's early writing development have contributed significantly to our understanding of the relationships among oral language, reading and writing. I will include here only those studies which have focused primarily on writing: King and Rentel (1981), Harste, Burke and Woodward (1981), Staton (1982), Graves (1982), and studies by Gundlach et al, Dyson, Sulzby, Greene and Sowers in Farr (in press).

King and Rentel analyzed children's story retellings, dictated stories and written stories from kindergarten through grade two. They found that patterns of growth which occurred first in oral retellings appeared later in dictated stories and

even later in written stories; this was true both for their analyses of cohesion and of story structure. Thus they showed the clear parallel between writing development and oral language development.

Harste, Burke and Woodward's work with 3-6 year olds showed that young children use the same literacy processes that adults use. They identified a number of process universals, or strategies, many of which operate in both oral and written language. That is, the children in their study used what they knew about language, both oral and written, to produce new written language. Thus this study, like others, demonstrated the holistic nature of language and that literacy is simply another way to use language.

Staton in her analysis of dialogue journals (i.e., written, year long conversations between student and teacher) demonstrated the lack of a clear dichotomy between oral and written language, as well as the functional use of aspects of both oral and written language in the journals. Because the writing in dialogue journals is interactive, it is like oral language; also, the use of what has been called scaffolding by the teacher in the journals has its parallel in the oral language interaction between mother and child during first language acquisition in our culture.

Graves' observational study of early elementary school children clearly shows uses of oral language during early writing development. He has linked these uses, appropriately enough, with what is often called "voice" in writing. He observed children first using speech and other sound effects while

writing, then using exclamation points, underlined and large words for stress, and finally incorporating oral features within the written text so that it "flows like speech." Thus he showed the "intertwining" of oral and written language, especially during early phases of writing development.

A significant contribution of the five studies in Farr (in press) is in illuminating the relationships among oral language, reading and writing. The first three studies, which focus on children who have not yet begun formal literacy instruction, or first grade, show how literacy begins to develop while oral language is still being acquired.

Gundlach, McLane, Stott and McNamee (chapter one, "The Social Foundations of Children's Early Writing Development") provide three case studies of pre-school aged children learning to write. All three of the case studies provide rich descriptions not only of the individual children who are beginning to learn to write over the course of several months, but also of the contexts in which the activity takes place. The notion of context in this study includes not only the physical setting or people involved in a given literacy event, but also the continuing relationship between the child and parents, siblings and others. This study highlights the parallel between oral language acquisition and early writing development by emphasizing the role of play in the latter, a factor which has been recognized as important in oral language development (Bruner 1983).

Dyson (chapter two, "Individual Differences in Emerging Writing") provides case studies of three preschool girls learning to write in their kindergarten class. The detailed descriptions of each child engaging in writing over the course of several months yield a picture of individual differences in development. This study departs significantly from previous work by investigating the interplay of three key factors in writing growth: the nature of the individual child, the nature of the situational context, and the nature of the writing system itself. Dyson, citing extensive research on oral language acquisition from psycholinguistics, demonstrates the parallel role of individual variation in both oral language development and writing development.

Sulzby (chapter three, "Kindergarteners as Writers and Readers") explores children's developing understandings about written language before they are able to read and write conventionally. She provides the results of two studies with one group of kindergarteners. The first study is a general interview which elicits children's understandings about written language; the second study is an experimentally structured set of related reading and writing tasks. Sulzby shows the interrelationship of oral language, reading and writing by illustrating how children use all their language capacities, both oral and written, to perform reading and writing tasks before they are actually reading from and writing print.

The final two studies in Farr (in press) show how literacy development in school continues to parallel the patterns of oral language development. Greene (chapter four, "Children's Writing

in an Elementary School Postal System" investigates in detail the letters children write in an internal postal system in a bilingual elementary school in a large western metropolitan area. Greene's study reveals how the language functions defined in sociolinguistic research on oral language (e.g., complaining, inviting, insulting, apologizing) are found in the letter writing of elementary school children. In fact, her results show that letter writing allows children to draw more fully on their oral language competence than they can in most kinds of school writing. This is especially true for language functions: in most school writing children are asked only to inform, whereas in these letters they invite, apologize, brag, compliment, complain, etc.

Sowers (chapter five, "Learning to Write in a Workshop: A Study in Grades One through Four") reports on an observational, classroom-based study by Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins and herself. Sowers' report of this project provides a detailed description of the classroom context in which children grew as writers, with special attention to the writing conferences which were the heart of the instructional approach which the teachers used. Sowers' study of the "conferencing model" of teaching writing draws out in detail how the conferences follow a predictable routine which is like the mother/child interaction which has been studied, in our culture, during oral language acquisition.

Having reviewed recent contributions to our understanding of children's writing as an aspect of language, I would like to turn now to the second view of writing which I introduced above:

writing growth as development.

Writing Growth as Development

When researchers began to study writing development, many of them looked not only to linguistics for a theory of language, but also to psychology for theories of development. Recent studies of child development have been based primarily on the theoretical framework of either Piaget or Vygotsky, or on a combination of the two. Although the two theories are distinct in important ways, they also share significant emphases. So, rather than being mutually exclusive as explanations of development in children, they can be viewed as complementary, each contributing part of the explanation for what happens in reality.

The Harste, Burke and Woodward study is clearly Vygotskian in its reliance on context for the interpretation of meaning; the language and literacy events in which the young children they studied participated revealed how children learn through interaction with contexts surrounding them. Also, their view of language and literacy development as growth through experience, rather than through biological maturation, places them squarely in a Vygotskian framework.

Staton's study of children's writing in dialogue journals is also clearly Vygotskian. She illustrated how the teacher's writing in response to the children's entries in these journals was essentially what Bruner termed "scaffolding" (Cazden 1982). This scaffolding provides a temporary framework which learners initially rely upon and then internalize, enabling them to do independently what they previously needed assistance to do. Staton's analysis of the written interaction between teacher and

student over time in the dialogue journals is a clear example of Vygotsky's view of development: what is first interpersonal later becomes intrapersonal .

The study by Gundlach et al explores the social context, primarily in the home, of preschool children for the beginnings of writing development. The context is defined not only physically and culturally, but also to include the relationships with others that each child has. The interaction in these relationships is significant in the development of writing by each child. In addition, the role of play in writing development, another important aspect of Vygotsky's theory, is shown to be highly significant.

In Greene's study of the letter writing of elementary school children, the Vygotskian concept of social tools is illustrated. Greene sees the conventions of letter writing, especially those of this school's internal postal system, as tools which the children manipulate in order to progress in knowledge of written language.

Dyson's case studies of kindergarten children learning to write clearly exemplify the learner as a creator of concepts about written language, concepts which are reformed when a conflict arises between them and new information from the world. Her detailed observations of each individual child interacting with the object of knowledge (the writing system) in the course of development shows her reliance on Piagetian theory. She departs, however, from a strictly Piagetian approach in her inclusion of the situational context (with such concerns as

purpose for writing) as another aspect of the interaction which must be considered in any valid study of writing development.

Finally, both Sulzby and Sowers illustrate the Piagetian concept of the active learner while at the same time they acknowledge the Vygotskian role of interaction with others in the learning process. Sulzby describes the conceptual nature of children's behaviors both in performing reading and writing tasks and in their understandings about reading and writing. In this description she also sees how the child used interaction with the adult examiner as evidence for the child's concepts, including how they elicit and use adult support (e.g., the reliance by some children on a conversational style of language rather than a monologue style when dictating a story). Sowers sees the interaction in writing conferences about pieces of writing in progress as a classic case of scaffolding. That is, the questions asked by a reader in the routine of the conference is the scaffolding which first enables young writers to perform with adult assistance, then later is internalized by them, enabling them to produce similar writing alone.

So far I have detailed two views of writing (writing as language and writing growth as development) as part of a framework within which to view recent studies of children's writing. Now I will discuss a third view which is important in understanding children's writing development. This view entails seeing writing as a varying entity in different contexts.

Writing Variation in Context

Essentially, the terms literacy, writing and reading are abstractions, constructs which we use to refer to <u>what</u> <u>people</u> <u>do</u>

with written language. Such a broad definition, however, is not sufficient: people do many different things with written language. Moreover, many educators argue that people are literate at many different levels (e.g., technical decoding and encoding, or writing an eloquent essay as a response to literature). Thus there are many different definitions of literacy, and of writing, in our society. In addition, there are many different uses to which these different kinds of writing are put. Consequently, we cannot refer to literacy as a single entity (e.g., one set of cognitive skills which learners can acquire). We must instead refer to a plurality of literacies, and variation in writing, if we are to reflect reality accurately.

What is crucial to an understanding of variation, in both oral and written language, is the social context in which the language is used. Literacy, like oral language, is adapted to fit various contexts according to a notion of appropriateness. Contexts for language use are always shifting and changing, and so, consequently, is our language, and literacy, use.

With this understanding of context and language variation, it is not difficult to go one step further to see why there is so much individual variation in oral and written language development. If the context is almost infinitely variable, and the language use within it ever shifting also, then each child learning language, and learning to be literate, experiences a unique variety of language and literacy events which help form his or her development. Consequently, we would not expect, and

research has not found, predictable stages of literacy development which all children can be expected to pass through.

All the recent studies of children's early writing development attest to individual variation in development. Indeed, individual variation in learning to write is more the rule than the exception. Dyson's study emphasizes this most strongly in its description of several different children with quite distinct learning patterns, patterns which can be understood only within the framework of each child's understandings and intentions. Dyson sees writing development as the result of a complex interplay of the individual child, the situational context, and the writing system itself, and explicitly draws the parallel to oral language development in this interplay. Because of the interplay of these factors, we expect individual differences in both writing development and in oral language development, and that is in fact what we find.

Both the Graves study and the Harste, Burke and Woodward study documented individual variation in development. Neither group of researchers found age-correlated development; there was great variation in ages at which various aspects of writing were learned. Growth, then, seemed to occur not as the result of "natural" stages which children reached at certain ages, but of experience with writing (and with reading and oral language, no doubt).

Gundlach et al and Sowers also focus on individual children and their courses of development, but also provide a rich description of the context in which the writing occurs. For Gundlach et al, this context (for most of the children) is that

of the home, and emphasizes the personal relationships with parents, peers and siblings that partially constitute the definition of context. For Sowers, the context is that of the classroom, and more particularly, the writing conferences with teacher and peers in which the writing instruction primarily takes place.

Greene, like Sowers, focuses on the classroom context in which the writing takes place, providing a description of it through ethnographic observation. In addition, she provides a description of the linguistic context in which various language functions (complaining, inviting, etc.) occurred, i.e., the writing in the letters themselves. Through her presentation of individual children from the study, she illustrates how language functions vary in context.

Although Sulzby, like Graves, posits some general sequences through which children pass as they learn to write and read, there is enough variation in their progress through these sequences to stop short of seeing them as discrete stages of development. Furthermore, Sulzby includes careful observation of the context in which the children read and write to explain differences in performance.

All of these recent studies, then, attest not only to differences in both language use and development, but they also relate the fact of this variation to the ever variable context. In different ways, these studies provide further knowledge about variation in writing and how it is shaped by particular contexts, as well as further knowledge about what constitutes a literacy

context.

Summary

In this presentation of the state of the art of children's early writing development, I have considered research findings in the context of work on emergent literacy, rather than in the context of work on writing processes and their development. I chose to do this because of the close relationships among reading, writing and oral language which research has been documenting increasingly. After briefly reviewing early studies of emergent literacy, both those which analyzed early written products and those which included analyses of literacy contexts, I reviewed in more detail some recent studies within a tripartite conceptual framework. This framework consisted of three views of writing: writing as language, writing growth as development and writing variation in context. The significant amount of convergence in findings from such a variety of studies leads me to conclude that what we are learning is not only an interesting, but also a valid picture of children's early writing development.

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